

Gender issues in history teaching

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Although it has diminished, there remains a gender imbalance in much history teaching. How and why is this?

I Four issues

1 There are intrinsic gender differences in the interests and aptitudes of boys and girls and therefore they are attracted by and respond differently to different historical topics.

Writing in a 'Handbook for History Teachers' published in England in 1962, one contributor in considering pupils' attitudes towards history, noted that:

General notions exist that there are significant differences according to sex, boys being particularly interested in certain topics, for example, warfare and battles, these having much less appeal to girls, who presumably are thought to be more readily involved in the gentler aspects of the human past.¹

Wisely, perhaps, he concluded that 'Few teachers, I suspect, would want to push this sort of distinction too far' and moved on to what he considered to be the more important question of whether children generally find certain aspects of history more interesting than others.

Nevertheless, despite the caution he expressed, the view that certain kinds of historical topics have different intrinsic appeals to girls and boys has not gone away; as, for example (admittedly a somewhat extreme example) expressed in this blog posted on an American home-schooling website:

Many years ago, teaching high school history, it suddenly dawned on me that the things that interested me about history were not the things that interested my male students. I loved stories of people, culture, art, relationships, family life, everyday living... So, on and on I went, fascinated by my own lectures, engaging my female students, and boring my male students. They wanted to talk tactics and blood and guts! The more violence and military intrigue I provided, the more fired up they were about history... And we shouldn't feel guilty about having different requirements based on gender either. The lie of egalitarianism continues to destroy. We all know that boys and girls are different. We should joyfully acknowledge those God-given differences and use them...

So, let your boys be "conquering warriors" and let your daughters enjoy all things domestic. They just might start enjoying history class a little bit more.²

¹ Thompson, D *Some Psychological Aspects of History Teaching*, in Burston, WH & Green, CW (eds) *Handbook for History Teachers*, Methuen, London, 1962, p18

² <http://angelinainlouisiana.blogspot.co.uk/2008/10/boys-and-girls-and-teaching-history.html>

2 The role played by women has been largely absent from school history teaching, curricula and textbooks.

A second long-running issue has been the level of gender imbalance in history teaching, history curricula and history textbooks – the way in which women have largely been noticeable by their absence from the story. But that does not mean that they were not there!

3 Women commonly appear only in a tokenistic, symbolic or stereotypical way:

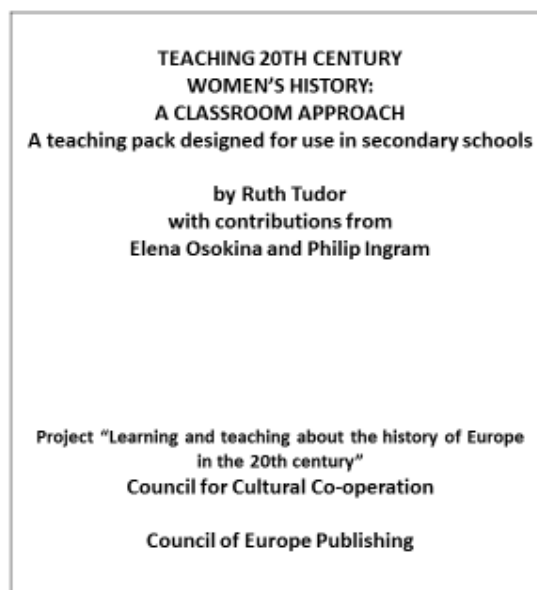
- women’s ‘history months’;
- specific topics (eg the women’s suffrage movement);
- exceptional ‘great women’;
- as national or ideological symbols.

4 There have often been insufficient resources and support to enable women to be properly represented in school history teaching

When I first started teaching, history books were commonly open to criticism for focussing too much on the minority - the rich and powerful - and for largely ignoring the history of those lower down the social, economic and political scale. This was rectified by an upsurge in social history and books which explored the history of the middle and labouring classes. But this popular social history, while examining the unequal relationship between the upper and lower classes often continued to ignore the gulf that existed between the social and legal status of women and men.

II Adjusting the gender balance

(i) Council of Europe



Council of Europe, October 2014

(iii) Towards a more inclusive history curriculum ³

(a) James Banks

Stage 1: Curriculum of the mainstream

The curriculum of the mainstream is male-centric. It ignores fully the experiences, voices, contributions, and perspectives of non-dominant individuals and groups. At this stage, all educational materials, including textbooks, films, and other teaching and learning tools, present information in a male-centric way. This stage is harmful both for students who identify with dominant culture and those from non-dominant groups. It has negative consequences for the former because, according to Banks:

It reinforces their false sense of superiority, gives them a misleading conception of their relationship with other racial and ethnic groups, and denies them the opportunity to benefit from the knowledge, perspectives, and frames of reference that can be gained from studying and experiencing other cultures and groups.

The curriculum of the mainstream has negative consequences for students from non-dominant groups, as well, failing to validate their identities, experiences, and perspectives. According to Banks it further alienates students who already struggle to survive in a school culture that differs so greatly from their home cultures.

Stage 2: Heroines and Holidays

Teachers at this stage "celebrate" difference by integrating information or resources about famous people and the cultural artefacts of various groups into the mainstream curriculum.

The strengths of this stage are that the teacher is attempting to diversify the curriculum by providing materials and knowledge outside the dominant culture and that it is an approach that is fairly easy to implement. Still, the weaknesses heavily outweigh the strengths:

- By focusing celebratory attention on non-dominant groups outside the context of the rest of the curriculum, the teacher is further defining these groups as "the other."
- Curricula at this stage fail to address the real experiences of non-dominant groups, instead focusing on the accomplishments of a few heroic characters. Students may learn to consider the struggles of non-dominant groups as "extra" information instead of important knowledge in their overall understandings of the world.
- The special celebrations at this stage often are used to justify the lack of effort at more authentic transformative measures.
- It trivializes the overall experiences, contributions, struggles, and voices of non-dominant groups, consistent with a male-centric curriculum.

Stage 3: Integration

At the Integration stage, teachers transcend heroines and holidays, adding substantial materials and knowledge about non-dominant groups to the curriculum. The teacher might add to her or his

³ Adapted from: Banks, J. (1993). Approaches to multicultural curriculum reform. In J. Banks and C. Banks (Eds.), *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon; and McIntosh, P. (2000). Interactive phases of personal and curricular re-vision with regard to race. In G. Shin and P. Gorski (Eds.), *Multicultural resource series: Professional development for educators*. Washington, D.C.: National Education Association.

collection of books those by authors of colour or by women. She or he might add a unit which covers, for example, the role of women in World War I.

The strengths of the Integration stage are that it transcends special celebrations to deal with real issues and concepts and that it more closely ties diverse material into the rest of the curriculum. But many weaknesses remain:

- New materials and units become secondary resources and knowledge as textbooks and the meat of the curriculum remain based on a male-centric orientation (Banks, 1993).
- New information is still delivered from a male-centric perspective.

Stage 4: Structural Reform

New materials, perspectives, and voices are woven seamlessly with current frameworks of knowledge to provide new levels of understanding from a more complete and accurate curriculum. The teacher dedicates her- or himself to continuously expanding her or his knowledge base through the exploration of various sources from various perspectives, and sharing that knowledge with her or his students. Students learn to view events, concepts, and facts through various lenses. "American History" includes African American History, Women's History, Asian American History, Latino American History, and all other previously differentiated fields of knowledge.

Stage 5: Multicultural, Social Action, and Awareness

In addition to the changes made in the Structural Reform stage, important social issues, including racism, sexism, and economic injustice, are addressed explicitly as part of the curriculum. The voices, ideas, and perspectives of the students regarding these and all other topics are brought to the fore in the learning experience -- the students themselves becoming yet another classroom resource. The textbook is viewed as a single perspective among many, and the relevance of its limitations, along with those of other educational media, are explored and discussed.

(b) Ruth Tudor (Teaching 20th century women's history: a classroom approach, Council of Europe, 2000)

Discussion in the seminars revealed that three broad approaches to teaching the history of women dominate European school history curricula. These might be summarised as teaching 'women's history', putting women into history and teaching 'gender history'.

- **Teaching 'women's history'**

This involves teaching 'units' of women's history which are distinct from 'other' history. The teaching of women's experiences as separate, freestanding topics is common. Popular choices are 'Women and War'; 'Women and the Suffrage'; and less popular, but not uncommon, 'Women (and children) during Industrialisation'.

Many teachers took the view that this approach had an important place in school history because it ensured that key questions were asked which focused on the particular and unique experiences of women, experiences which might otherwise get 'lost', and which could challenge 'traditional' historical narratives. However, the teachers were also aware of the dangers in this approach. It set women's history apart, rendered it 'one off' and identified it as less important. By decontextualising women's experiences in the past, it failed to explain their experiences and the constraints under which they lived, and to appreciate their contribution to the wider society. It marginalized women's experience.

Such an approach often failed to ‘finish’ the story. What happened to women, for example, after the First and Second World Wars? After women got the vote? In addition, there was an implicit assumption within this approach, that ‘other’ history is ‘men’s’ history. It also ran the risk – by talking about women as distinct to ‘other’ – of neglecting the diversity of the many differences between women.

- **Putting women into history**

This is often called ‘mainstreaming’ by many continental Europeans. Mainstreaming refers to the integration of the history of women into some or all history topics. Such an approach is common in many western and northern European classrooms.

Although this approach addresses some of the problems outlined above, many teachers felt that, unless key questions were carefully designed and learning objectives identified, women’s unique experiences and contribution could all too easily ‘disappear’. ‘Did my students know that they were learning about women as well as others in the wider society?’ was a common concern. Furthermore, this approach often ignored the power dimension of gender relationships.

- **Teaching ‘gender history’**

‘Gender history’ is defined here as the study of ideas and beliefs about both women and men, and about relationships between men and women. How did ideas about the nature of men and women affect beliefs about their role in society? Beliefs about gender have changed over time and, at different periods, have had a greater or lesser impact. For example, during industrialisation in nineteenth century Britain, ideas about gender differences were arguably more powerful and had a greater impact – resulting in spheres of activity that were more separate – than they had in some earlier times. This was the time when beliefs about the nature and character of women – physically weak, emotional, caring – and men – full of action, fit to wield power – became institutionalised. This relationship between the phenomenon of industrialisation and beliefs about gender was common throughout Europe and images of masculine and feminine idealisations during industrialisation can be an excellent ‘way in’ to engage students in beliefs and ideas about gender.

Teachers who participated in the seminars were moving towards incorporating a history of gender perspective into their history teaching. Gender history can complement the other two approaches and is particularly interesting to teenagers. This is partly because it is about relationships, and partly because it helps both boys and girls to understand the origins of ideas about gender that impact on their own lives.

(c) Towards a more Inclusive history teaching

- In principle, all learners have individual needs, and they all experience learning in different ways that might be affected, for example, by their gender, ethnicity, social class.
- A number of history educators have emphasised the importance of ‘starting from where pupils are’ by exploring what pupils already know through developing family history, local sites, monuments, mainstream films, drama, books, and other media.
- Pupils will draw on whatever version of the past they have to hand to justify or inform particular views and positions. If the version available in school seems too remote, too disconnected from the versions at home and from the TV, it may become less ‘usable’ and, in turn, may be cast aside in favour of less critical and less informed versions.

III Who does better – boys or girls?

- There is very little research on how gender and class affect pupils' response to school history.⁴ It seems likely that issues of social class, gender and race have profound and particular influences on pupils' starting points in history classrooms and on the version of the past – the one constructed in school or the one learnt at home – which pupils find most usable in explaining and understanding the present ... There is relatively little work on the impact of either gender or class in relation to pupil learning in history classrooms – although the under-representation of women and minority groups in books and schemes of work has been explored, and both are well documented in more general terms.
- The results evidenced by the analyses of the factor of gender undermines contentions that females are subject to significantly lower levels of achievement in relation to the assimilation of temporal cognition or the retention of historical knowledge.⁵ Therefore, it seems reasonable to discount gender as a performance determinant. Additionally, it would appear that previous studies which attribute advance levels of performance in history to gender differentials should be treated with caution if not scepticism ... an overview of the data indicates that gender is not an attainment determinant within primary history.

⁴ Teaching & Learning History 11-18, Alison Kitson and Chris Husbands with Susan Steward, Open University Press, 2011

⁵ Hodkinson, A, Are boys really better than girls at History? A critical examination of gender-related attainment differentials within the English educational system, IJHLTR International Journal of Historical Learning Teaching and Research, Volume 8, Number 2, October 2009

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